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ABSTRACT

A grounded theory study examined six high school teachers' conceptions of classroom discussion, and their purposes for using classroom discussion. Data were gathered during in-depth interviews and a think-aloud task in which teachers rank ordered five vignettes of classroom interaction. Both urban and suburban high school teachers were involved. Results indicated that teachers used discussion as a method of instruction to encourage students to build their own knowledge of the subject matter and to expose students to multiple perspectives. Results also indicated that teachers used classroom discussion to teach their students how to discuss. Findings suggest that (1) teachers have multiple conceptions of discussion, but are not fully credited with the amount of thought they give to classroom interactions; (2) teachers' leadership role during classroom discussion is critical to its success; and (3) teacher educators and school administrators should consider teaching the discussion method because of its potential to enhance student learning and democratic citizenship. (Contains 26 references.) (RS)

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TEACHERS' CONCEPTIONS OF DISCUSSION AS METHOD AND OUTCOME

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TEACHERS' CONCEPTIONS OF DISCUSSION AS METHOD AND OUTCOME

Introduction

Using classroom discussion as a method of instruction and for teaching students how to interact verbally with others is not new. Over forty years ago, Schwab (1954) was clear about his belief that classroom discussion was imperative for developing in students the "intellectual arts" of thinking and communication:

> In a curriculum concerned primarily with specific understandings of specific objects, discussion as a device of instruction may be defended as a peculiarly powerful teaching instrument...but it cannot be maintained that for a curriculum so oriented discussion is indispensable. It is merely one of several usable techniques. In a curriculum, however, which aims to impart intellectual arts and skills and habits and attitudes, as well as bodies of information, discussion is not simply efficient or powerful, but indispensable, for the same reason that the act of swimming is indispensable to teaching that art and practice on the piano indispensable to teaching that. Discussion is an engagement in and a practice of the activities of thought and communication" (pp. 54-55).

My purpose for this paper is to suggest an explanatory theory of teachers' thinking about classroom discussion. Previous studies reported initial findings about six conceptions of discussion held by teachers (Larson, 1995; Larson & Parker, 1996). Teachers thought of discussion as recitation, a teacher-directed conversation, an open-ended conversation, a series of challenging questions, a guided transfer of knowledge, and as practice at verbal interaction. Further analysis of these data showed how these conceptions of discussion intersected with two purposes of discussion: (1) discussion as a method of instruction, where the purpose is to help engage students in a lesson by encouraging verbal interactions; and (2) discussion competence as the subject matter--as the desired outcome of instruction and an end in itself. I report a grounded theory study. A grounded theory of this sort should be useful for studying the persistence of recitation under the guise of discussion, improving instruction with classroom discussion, and suggesting how discussion might be taught as an instructional outcome.

Literature

Purposes for Classroom Discussion

Classroom discussion serves several educational purposes because it is a unique form of classroom talk, and a very special group dynamic. Discussion requires students and teacher to talk back-and-forth at a high cognitive and affective level, both with one another and the subject matter being discussed. Dillon explains this by stating, "What they talk about is an issue, some topic that is in question for them. Their talk consists of advancing and examining different proposals over the issue" (1994, p. 7).

Discussion is thought to be a useful teaching technique for developing higher order thinking skills; Skills that enable students to interpret, analyze, and manipulate information. Students explain their ideas and thoughts, rather than merely recount, or recite, memorized facts and details. During discussion learners are not passive recipients of information that is transmitted from a teacher. Rather, learners are active participants. As they interact during the discussion, students construct an understanding about the topic (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). In addition to developing thinking skills and constructing knowledge, discussion is an effective way to develop student attitudes, and advance student capability for moral reasoning (Gall, 1985). In short, discussion provides opportunities for student thoughtfulness about the information received in class, and it requires students and teacher to develop a set of skills and dispositions that allow the discussions to take place.

Discussion, when combined with probing, open-ended questions, requires students to organize available information for the purpose of arriving at their own defensible answers. Engle and Ochoa (1988) suggested that the following types of questions should be evident during classroom discussions: definitional questions ("What does that mean?"), evidential questions ("What reasons can you give for your belief?"), speculative questions ("What if that hadn't happened?"), and policy questions ("What should be done?"). These types of questions are needed to stimulate student thinking and guide classroom discussions.

For discussions to educate students, they should be serious interactions where students "support their ideas with evidence, where their opinions are subject to challenge by their peers as well

as the teacher, and where the teacher's ideas are equally open to criticism" (Engle & Ochoa, 1988, p. 47). The purpose of probing questions and discrepant viewpoints is to encourage interactions and to encourage students to respond with the most powerful evidence available to them. Roby (1988) created a five-level model of discussion that describes how teacher questioning influences classroom discussion. The levels range from recitation-style questions (what Roby calls a "quiz show") to student-determined questions with no educational purpose or intended resolution (Roby's "bull session"). One step removed from the quiz show is the "problematical discussion," where the teacher uses questions that address a puzzling problem. Next is the "informational discussion" in which questions, whether from teacher or students, verify statements made in the discussion. Closest to the bull session is the "dialectical discussion." In this, questions encourage the exchange of multiple opinions and perspectives.

The very process of discussing a topic may facilitate abstract learning processes (Bridges, 1979, 1987). Bridges suggested that discussions contributed to discussants' understanding of a topic by: expanding each discussant's information on a topic with information from other discussants; fostering different perspectives on a topic; providing opportunities for discussants to present alternative ideas about a topic; providing opportunities for other discussants to criticize, accept, or refute these alternative ideas; and encouraging mutual modifications among discussants' opinions to produce a group decision or consensus. Group interaction is the important component for each of these as it shapes and directs the exploration of a topic.

Discussion is frequently referred to as an instructional method that encourages the social construction of meaning and promotes conceptual understanding. Discussion serves to unite the cognitive and the "social aspects" of the classroom. Cazden (1988) refers to this when suggesting that immediate feedback is available, during discussions, to whatever is said. If it is unclear or controversial, those listening will inform the speaker. Understanding is critical during discussion. Discussants, thus, become very conscious of those with whom they are discussing, and present ideas with the social awareness that others are listening.

Classroom Discussion as a Curriculum Outcome

When considering discussion as a curriculum outcome, students' participation in the actual discussion becomes an end in itself. By teaching students how to discuss, the benefits for using discussion in the classroom can be extended to all areas of students' lives. The research on how teachers "teach discussion" is limited. Most that is available is related to citizenship education because discussion provides one way for citizens to interact. The argument has been made that a central characteristic of a democratic community, in addition to the free election of representatives, is the formulation of policy through free and open discussion (Barber, 1989; Bridges, 1987). Such discussions can be characterized by "creativity, variety, openness and flexibility, inventiveness, capacity for discovery, eloquence, potential for empathy and affective expression" (Barber, 1989, p. 355). Discussion with these characteristics becomes a process that promotes understanding and improved perspectives on issues (Mathews, 1994; Parker, 1996), and teachers encourage students to learn this process. Discussion skills that students might learn include listening, clearly making claims, supporting claims with facts, helping a group move through obstacles, critiquing ideas and not individuals (keeping a high respect for human dignity), and developing together a shared understanding of the problem or issue (Barber, 1984; Mathews, 1994; Parker, 1996).

If students or citizens are to engage in discussions that allow for the development of opinions and positions on issues common to a group, then competence in the skills of discussion is required. The very act of discussing requires participants to interact in a particular and structured manner. These structured interactions will likely be different from interactions during debates or arguments. As Bridges (1987) states:

> discussion require(s) us to set aside...feelings of hostility or affection towards a member of a group in order to pay proper attention to the merits or demerits of what he or she is actually saying...(For example), I can appreciate the value of strangers' contributions to a discussion without knowing anything about their social or economic standing or their relationships with familiar friends (p. 36).

Method

This study examined six high school teachers' conceptions of classroom discussion, and their purposes for using classroom discussion. Data were gathered during in-depth interviews and a think-aloud task in which teachers rank ordered five vignettes of classroom interaction. The vignettes portrayed discussion in various ways, and the teachers ranked the vignettes according to their similarities and differences to discussions in their own classrooms. The particular discussion type that was judged by a teacher to be most like his/her own was further elaborated in the think-aloud interview until a fairly clear portrait of the teacher's conception was obtained. Both urban and suburban high school teachers were involved.

Teachers/Informants

A purposive sample of six high social studies teachers was selected for this study. All claimed to use discussion as part of their teaching strategies. Teaching assignments were similar, with each participant teaching one or more of the following high school social studies courses: world history, United States history, current events, American government, sociology, or psychology. While any subject area may use discussion, Gross and Zeleny (1958) emphasized the specific role of social studies in teaching classroom discussion: "Since adult organizations so often make decisions with respect to policy by means of the discussion method it is difficult for a teacher of the social studies to over-emphasize (discussion techniques and procedures) in the classroom" (p. 484). Social studies, with its connection to social interaction, societal critique, and civic participation, may be the part of the school curriculum where classroom discussion is most appropriately used by teachers (Engle & Ochoa, 1988).

The participants taught at one of two schools: a suburban, primarily Caucasian, high school (three teachers); or, an urban (inner-city), racially diverse, high school (three teachers). Two sample groups provided data from teachers who had diverse backgrounds and teaching experience, worked in diverse communities, and taught diverse students. All of the teachers were Caucasians.

Teachers at the suburban high school taught either "regular track" or honors classes. I will refer to them as: Alex, Bill, and Cathy. "Alex" is 46 years old and has taught U. S. and world history

and advanced placement U.S. history for 22 years. He has both an undergraduate and master's degree in history. "Bill," is 40 years old and has taught 11th grade U.S. History and 12th grade current events courses for all his 18 years of teaching. He has an undergraduate and a master's degree in history. "Cathy" is 44 years old and has taught U.S. and world history, psychology, and sociology for 22 years. She has an undergraduate degree in English, with a minor in social science, and a master's degree in secondary education.

Teachers at the urban high school taught either "low track," "regular track," or honors classes. Their names are Deborah, Elaine, and Frank. "Deborah" is 50 years old, and has taught 14 years. The past five years she has taught U. S. history in self-contained, special education classrooms. She has an undergraduate degree in education with a minor in United States history, a special education teaching certificate, and a master's degree in early childhood special education. "Elaine" is 40 years old and has taught U. S. history, and sociology for 20 years. She has an undergraduate major in sociology with a minor in history and a teaching credential in secondary social science. She has a master's in counseling, "Frank" is 55 years old and has taught advanced placement U. S. history, honors American government, and regular-track U. S. history courses during his 25 year teaching career. He has an undergraduate degree in political science, and a master's in educational administration.

Data Gathering

Data were of two kinds: responses to an interview schedule and responses during a think-aloud task. In the interview, the teachers spoke directly about their conceptions and definitions of discussion. They described the mental image that came to mind when they heard the term classroom discussion, distinguished between an ideal discussion and an imperfect one, gave examples of discussion, and listed educational rationales for discussion. The think-aloud exercise was an additional technique to explore these teachers' notions of ideal discussions. Following a technique suggested by Anderson (1980), five vignettes of classroom interaction, each a paragraph long, were composed. These drew on Roby's (1988) five-level model described earlier. Each vignette described a classroom discussion in one of five teachers' classrooms (Jim, Kerry, Jack, Chris, Brian). Jim's

vignette describes a "quiz show," Kerry's a "problematical discussion," Jack's an "informational discussion," Chris' a "dialectical discussion," and Brian's a "bull session."

The teachers were asked to order the vignettes from the one most like a discussion in their classroom to the one least like it, thinking aloud and sharing their reasoning all the while. Then, using their top ranked vignette, the teachers were asked to sketch on a seating chart the interaction patterns they thought would occur during such a discussion, again thinking aloud. These lines depicted the verbal interactions between teacher and student, student and teacher, and student and student.

Data Analysis

The analysis of data consisted of the following four stages. First, I generated categories by examining collected data, attempting to identify common themes in the data. This was the constructive phase of data analysis where I read the transcriptions and created initial categories. The second stage involved the integration of categories and their properties. During this stage, I compared similarities and differences among the categories created in stage one. Some categories combined with others that had similar properties. The third stage further integrated the data around fewer, more encompassing categories. This process entailed: creating new categories, refining (sharpening) categories, and elaborating (further illustrating) existing categories. These first three stages did not necessarily follow this linear progression. Typical of this method of analysis, these stages formed a repetitious process of coding, comparing, and refining (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The constant comparison of data led to the fourth stage of data analysis: writing a "theory in-process" of teachers' conceptions of discussion. These conceptions, abstracted from the data, are then available for comparisons with other samples that provided additional sources of data. This analysis procedure has been illustrated previously with data collected from the three teachers at the suburban high school (Larson & Parker, 1996).

Further analysis of the data led to the emergence of connections among the six conceptions of discussion[1]. This process is the very nature of generating theory. As Glaser & Strauss (1967) write: "When generation of theory is the aim...one is constantly alert to emergent perspectives that will

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[1]As I listed previously, teachers thought of discussion as recitation, a teacher-directed conversation, an open-ended conversation, a series of challenging questions, a guided transfer of knowledge, and as practice at verbal interaction.

change and help develop...theory...The published word is not the final one, but only a pause in the never-ending process of generating theory" (p. 40).

Hypotheses/Findings

Teachers' conceptions of discussion are based in part on what they hope to accomplish during a lesson. Each conception of discussion becomes more or less viable as a method of instruction in relation to teachers' purpose. In this section, I describe how teachers' conceptions of discussion intersected with two purposes of discussion: (1) discussion as a method of instruction, where the purpose is to help engage students in a lesson by "sparking a reaction," "making analogies," "bringing alternative ideas to the topic," or "making them think a little bit more instead of just regurgitating information," whatever the subject matter of the lesson might be; and (2) discussion competence as the subject matter--as the desired outcome of instruction and an end in itself. Here, as one teacher said, "the process of dialogue, or exchanging ideas, is fundamental to a democratic society. If they can do it in this artificial environment, then I think I'm guaranteed that they will continue those kinds of dialogues (in other settings)." While I differentiate between these two purposes, teachers will often incorporate both in their lessons at the same time. That is, they will use discussion to teach subject matter, and they will direct their students to develop the skills needed to interact during a discussion.

According to the canons of the grounded theory approach, I present my findings as hypotheses that are grounded in data and tentative, pending additional rounds of data gathering and analysis. As such, they provide an additional layer of understanding of teachers' thinking about discussion. Because they are hypotheses, I use the present tense and speak generally of "teachers" rather than of "these six teachers." Each purpose of discussion is presented along with segments from the interview and think aloud transcripts. I provide data to illustrate each category, and to reveal how the categories were developed. Segments of field notes and quotations provide evidence that the categories are well grounded in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Discussion as a Method of Instruction

Teachers have multiple conceptions of discussion. This conclusion, however, does not fully credit teachers with the amount of thought they give to classroom interactions. When knowing facts is important but not sufficient, teachers want classroom discussions to go beyond transmitting information. Teachers believe the process of discussing is one way to encourage students to use higher-level thinking skills. As one teacher said, "students have to have knowledge of a topic before they can talk about it." In this section I focus on two reasons teachers report that they use discussion as a method of instruction: encouraging students to build their own knowledge of the subject matter, and exposing students to multiple perspectives.

Building knowledge. A distinctive value of the interactions that occur during discussions can be summed up in the following idea: the very act of discussing allows students to connect what they learn in school to their own life in ways other methods of instruction may not. It allows students to interact with the subject matter. As Cathy said, it involves students "in problem solving...the talk is about what is in the book and is then applied to current events" (emphasis hers). She continued:

> [My] main point for discussion is that...you can effectively use the inductive process. How does what we learned about "there and then" relate today? How is it similar, how is it different, and what are some conclusions we can draw?

In other words, the process of discussing encourages students to carry historical and background knowledge (the "then and there") from school settings to their lives outside of school (the "here and now"). Alex reported using discussions to help students "make analogies and...connections between the past and the present." Perennial problems, he believed, affect us repeatedly over time. He used discussion to help his students recognize links between problems that seem unconnected on the surface, but share a similar underlying problem. He continued:

> as far as I'm concerned that is what makes history come alive...What's so different about the problems that the Greeks dealt with and with what we deal with today?

Bill commented similarly, "I am a real proponent of taking what you do in class and making sure there is a link to the political realm. A real, not a make-believe, a real link."

Teachers reported that discussions build knowledge if they intellectually engage students. In other words, the topic of the talk had to be of interest to the students. It is the engagement that teachers

believe encourages students to develop deeper understandings of the subject matter. Additionally, engaging discussions increase student motivation to make connections between what they talk about in school and what is happening in the world around them. Elaine referred to this directly when she said, "Discussion causes students to feel they have a voice now, and they start taking interest in Time magazine or reading the newspaper because it has something in it that we talked about in class." She continued:

> Parents have given me lots of positive feedback because their kids are coming home and talking about stuff that they learned. Because now it's their own. They heard another person say something that they disagree with, or that they don't know about, and suddenly they are motivated to go check it out...A lot of times they [students] will still be talking about the issue on the way out the door. And I like that because that shows me that the discussion meant something to them. That it matters to them.

This motivation is believed to help students recognize connections between topics and concepts rather than memorizing facts.

Teachers believe that discussion clarifies students' thinking. Teachers were clear that "clarification" will only occur if students have time to read and research the information they would be discussing. Bill's comments represent the thinking of several of the teachers. He analyzed one particular discussion that he felt was very successful by stating:

> What has really made this dialogue, this discussion, as rich as it was is the painful research that we did. [The students] went in and they may have looked at two hundred articles between them, and then ultimately brought all of that back into this arena.

He continued:

> These young people can't walk in just cold, [with the teacher] saying "OK, just talk." There's something that is predetermining the topic of discussion. The teacher has to provide the students with some form of a catalyst --a reading, a quot[ation], a passage-- and they're supposed to read it, consider it, and be super critical of it before they walk into the arena [classroom].

Bill credited the research and reading that his students did for the success of a different discussion, this one about free trade agreements:

> if I would have given them just one or two resources to read and use, this discussion would not have had anywhere close to the depth that it had. I mean I had a forty-foot-long printout that I got from Info-Trak, and then I had gone through and highlighted potential articles for them to read.

As students build knowledge, a role for teachers during discussion is to monitor inaccurate or incorrect comments. Alex, for example, clarified students' thinking by directing discussions away from "faulty" or "incorrect" facts contributed by students.

> As a teacher you should intervene and correct wrong facts. For example, today someone was mentioning that Hitler was a Jew, and that explains why he was so hard on the Jewish people, but it also is a confounding piece of information about why he would do the things he did. Well, if that is not addressed, then the discussion will not serve the purpose of giving information to the students. The teacher needs to have the factual knowledge in mind in order to make sure the information being discussed is accurate and correct.

Cathy said she wanted to keep her students' discussions close to the content they were reading: "What I like about using discussion is that...it is tied to the subject matter and content...the talk is about what is in the book." Classroom discussion helps students "think a bit more" about the topic. As Alex said, discussions require students to develop a "higher level of thinking skills" about the subject under discussion. He described higher-level thinking as the ability to organize a collection of information about one topic so it could inform a different, related topic.

While discussion is used to clarify subject matter for students, teachers also use classroom discussion to present subject matter to students who are not prepared for class. Three teachers mentioned their frustration that students often come to class without having completed their research or reading about a subject. These teachers admitted to a form of defensive teaching where they lowered their expectations for student preparation, and spent time during class discussions to explore the subject matter. Alex's comment typified the other teachers' comments about this: "you can't rely on the kids to read these days, or to take very good notes...so they need to be able to interact and play with the information to figure it out." Elaine planned "choral readings" with her classes before discussions: "I know that [reading together out loud] sounds 'babyish,' but I do it with them because those who haven't read are at a loss. So, I feel like, let's just do it right then and there." Cathy recalled that she increased the frequency of discussions about "textbook information" as a way for students who have read to share information with those who have not: "Students are reading less and less. If they are going to read less, then they are going to have to discuss more."

Finally, teachers consider recitation to be one type of discussion, and a technique to increase student knowledge. While teachers will transmit knowledge to their students through recitations, they consider recitation to be a method for assessing their students' learning. In other words, they often use recitations as a formative assessment tool. Elaine reported using recitation during activities she called "quiz shows." Teams of students competed to answer her questions correctly. She described the interaction and purpose in the following way:

> If we are having a quiz show, where half of the class is on one side and half on the other, then I'll read the question and see who can get the answer. I can cover the same thing [privately with] textbook questions that I cover [publicly with] the quiz show discussions, but they have to prepare for them so their team can win.

Cathy suggested that recitations were, perhaps, not as effective in building student knowledge as other types of discussion, but still found value in using them:

> This is not my choice of how discussion is to be used, but it does serve a definite educational purpose if I were reviewing for a test, or after a chapter/unit had been covered. It is an effective way to make sure the students...read the textbook and understand the main points... There are definite times for this use of discussion, and it is not a completely invalid method.

Exposure to multiple perspectives. A second reason teachers consider teaching with discussion is to expose students to multiple perspectives of the subject matter. The interactions among the students and the teacher allow for the consideration of several ideas and points of view. Teachers plan discussions in an attempt to expose multiple perspectives, and to determine how well students understand perspectives other than their own. Some of the perspectives are presented when students share findings from reading and research, and when students share from a personal point of view. Cathy reported using such discussions by bringing up topics on which her students had an array of knowledge. Her goal was not to reach a consensus or draw a conclusion but to "engage" students and draw out their ideas about the topic:

> Well, they are engaged with the topic...participating and bringing alternative ideas to the topic. Most of my topics hardly ever [permit] only one way to look at something.

Cathy thought this kind of discussion helped to give her students practice understanding classmates' viewpoints. Elaine felt similarly:

> I want them [students] to at least look at other sources of information, other points of view, other experiences... [to] see things from a larger point of view...I want them to

> become critical thinkers, and to realize that they can learn from a lot of different sources, not just...what they agree with or are familiar with.

Frank recalled that he also discussed topics familiar to his students. His purpose was similar: students' points of view will be explored through the talk.

> [I]f they are involved in...talking and reacting with me, then we are going to wind up, if all goes well, with several points of view, many points of view, between boys and girls and different ideas.

Frank wanted to direct students toward several points of view without "parading" the facts past them during a lecture. His role was critical to the discussion because he encouraged students to talk and react to his comments and ideas. Frank taught in an inner-city high school. He explained how using discussion "in this part of town" had the potential of exposing students to different points of view:

> I think it is easiest for us in this part of town to see real differences in the traditional facts that are placed in the history texts, or different sides of the issues. I mean we have many points of view represented here, right? And that's the joy of working here in this part of town. Different issues are always here in the classroom, and I have to think of them too. For example, just the way people see the world and people react to different things like who's in power, how you present yourself, and different definitions about the rightness of a society, and appropriate behavior.

Teachers also use discussion to explore multiple points of view by assigning a role, or viewpoint, to a student. Bill took this approach when he reported engaging his class in an examination of different historical perspectives. He set up "contrived" discussions from particular time periods in American history, and then used role-playing and questions to challenge students' understanding of how decisions were made and what people believed. For example, his students role-played discussions among congressmen in 1789. Students researched a role, assumed that character, then reenacted a congressional hearing. Some students represented people from the present day as well, and entered the discussion by bringing knowledge that was different or unknown in the 1700s. As this diverse group tried to question, negotiate, and converse on a specific topic, students addressed multiple points of view across multiple eras of history. Elaine also used role-playing, through mock trials and mock editorials, for this purpose. She directed the discussion by placing the students in very specific roles. In turn, these roles served as a constant guide for the interactions during the classroom discussions.

Teachers think discussion is useful when they detect that their students are biased, have not considered other points of view, or have a shallow understanding of what is being discussed. Frank told of a current events discussion where students were only providing a "Democrat's argument," so he questioned their comments from a "Republican's perspective:"

> I've had enough experience with it [presenting alternative perspectives], and I know what I need to do to challenge students, or to make them angered or opinionated about a viewpoint.

Deborah and Bill used strategies similar to Frank when presenting their students with different perspectives.

> Deborah:
> I guess I use this [presenting alternative perspectives] because I am trying to get them to see that there are other points of view because they [the students' perspectives] are so narrow...they often come from very narrow backgrounds, so they hide behind this "I know this is right" attitude. So I will say something like, "Well, what if it were different than you believe?"
>
> Bill:
> I see myself coming in and engaging people in almost a Socratic dialogue...Throw questions, prompt. I do that an awful lot in...large groups especially...I take on a persona, I take on a position that I know will spark a reaction from the [class]...It's my opportunity in class to be an actor, and basically to elicit dialogue and a reaction from them [with questions].

Teachers see student diversity--differences in areas such as cultural background, ethnicity, gender, race, learning styles, and ability--positively and negatively relative to exposing students to multiple perspectives. Diversity offers the potential for an increased awareness of different perspectives and ideas during the classroom discussions. Students with different backgrounds may provide a wide range of viewpoints about an issue. As Alex mentioned, if no one had a different perspective or point of view than his, then the discussions would quickly end, and the teacher would be "pontificating by himself" without presenting alternative perspectives on a topic. Diversity also has social benefits because it requires students to interact with classmates with whom they typically may not have contact during the school day.

However, teachers think that student diversity increases conflict and disagreement when students question and challenge one another. This often results because students do not understand other students who are different from them, be it a point of view or ability level. Teachers report that

they talk more, and begin to dominate the classroom interactions, when their students become embroiled in conflict. By limiting student talk, teachers control the voicing of different ideas and opinions. While discussion is used to expose students to different perspectives, teachers monitor the interactions closely, and are quite concerned about any negative results of controversy.

Discussion Competence as the Subject Matter

Teachers use classroom discussion to teach their students how to discuss. As students discuss subject matter, teachers will provide guidance and feedback to students about their "discussion skills." The classroom becomes a location for students to experience, and engage in, discussion, with the purpose of encouraging students to discuss issues and ideas on their own. In this section I first describe purposes teachers gave for *teaching* discussion, then I describe the strategies teachers used when teaching students to be discussants.

Purposes. Teachers want their students to learn how to engage in fruitful discussions for many of the same reasons that they teach with discussion. If students will engage in discussions outside of the classroom, then the possibility of students building knowledge, thinking in-depth, or exploring multiple perspectives about issues also extends outside of the classroom. Teachers report benefits from teaching with discussion, and they report *potential* benefits for their students from teaching how to engage in discussions. According to Bill:

> You're building confidence. Most of these people [referring to his students] don't have the confidence right now to stand up in front of the school board meeting or public library committee...If I can show students that [an] intellectual exchange of ideas is enjoyable, I mean, dialogue--that kind of an exchange in a non malicious environment, in a non-threatening environment--can be fun, then I think I've done them a service in terms of building a participatory citizen who's going to be more active in the community. And, I equate activism with human happiness.

Cathy made a similar point with her observation that her students "know a lot of things, but they haven't the experience."

Another theme that emerged related to citizenship education. During their interactions students practice with discussion skills and ultimately make decisions as a group. As such, they begin taking the role of democratic citizens. Bill, for example, outlined this theme directly:

> it is the process [of discussion] that I'm most intrigued with. I think the process of dialogue, of exchanging ideas, is fundamental to a democratic society. If they can do it

> in this artificial environment [a classroom], then I think I'm guaranteed...that they will then continue those kinds of dialogues at their places of employment, at the dinner table at home, or in a public forum. (emphasis his).

Frank said he believed that discussion skills help citizens in a democracy communicate better, and that he used discussion to teach future citizens the "lost art" of conversing with one another:

> Discussion is almost a type of democracy. I think that we are at the point now where we yell at each other, the way this country is going. I would hope that from what they do in here they would see this and say "wait a minute, it's OK even if I don't agree with someone else." And from that point of view the discussion is defensible.

To support this line of thinking, Elaine reported her belief that practicing discussion skills helped students in nonschool, social settings:

> kids who go through my classes are learning communication skills so they are becoming better speakers, they are more confident with guests at home, for example, or more able to raise questions to their parents, or more able to find other points of view. So it's kind of a liberating thing for the kids to learn these personal, social skills. It's one thing to be grappling with [course] content, but they are also growing personally.

Similar to the purpose of preparing citizens, teachers think discussion skills will help students who may not interact with peers. Students may refuse to engage in classroom discussions, believing their contributions are not valued by the class. Teachers think that one reason students do not participate is that they feel they are "different" from the rest of the class in some way; They are shy, intimidated, represent a minority view, differ racially from the majority of the class, or believe they do not have a voice in the classroom or larger community. This concerns teachers because discussion is meant to encourage participation and learning, not thwart it. Bill, for example, was quite direct about gender, commenting that girls and boys talk differently. He said boys talk more frequently, but when girls do talk it is after more reflection. He explained that "boys tend to just spout off and not necessarily think through what they are going to say whereas girls really have thought through it ahead of time." He attempted to overcome the high frequency of talk from boys by directing his comments to girls and telling his classes about his observations of gender differences during discussions.

Elaine's comment was similar: "Women aren't as willing to voice opinions...I think that unless you teach the boys to listen to the girls, and teach the girls to speak, we won't lose the gender thing." She mentioned that girls may feel especially intimidated when they are in discussions with exuberant, loud boys. She recounted a time when two girls were asked to give an opinion after three loud boys

gave theirs: "you hardly heard the girls who followed them, real quiet, real hurried, like they didn't think anybody was listening."

Teachers teach discussion directly because they believe students need skills in discussing, and that these skills require instruction. Bill suggested that all students are capable of discussing, but they need to know "how to participate" in classroom discussions, and they require "quite a bit of practice in learning how to discuss." During an interview, for example, Bill mentioned that the age of students will not pose much of a problem for discussion provided that the students receive instruction about discussion:

> I think age has something to do with it [the ability of students to engage in discussions], but the chronological differences between sophomores, juniors, and seniors is not so great that good tutelage can't overcome.

Likewise, Elaine described how previous experience with classroom discussion helps students become more mature discussants:

> They are not used to us (teachers) giving them the ball. So often teachers will present the stuff and not have very many people answer (the teacher's) questions...So then, when we want them to think on their own, they get really nervous.

As students develop discussion abilities, they are better prepared to participate in discussions that have an objective. After describing a class session during which students shared varied and diverse opinions, Alex reported that opinions are important, but

> they have to lead to something. For example, if the discussion is on abortion, and all that is thrown out is a bunch of opinions about abortion, then the result doesn't necessarily lead to any end goal.

Elaine felt similarly:

> I want them [students] to at least look at other sources of information, other points of view, other experiences... [to] see things from a larger point of view...I want them to become critical thinkers, and to realize that they can learn from a lot of different sources, not just...what they agree with or are familiar with.

To provide students with the skills needed to participate in fruitful discussions, teachers teach them explicitly.

How discussion is taught. Teachers think of discussion as a skill that requires practice sessions. At times they plan discussions so students may practice engaging in verbal interactions with one another. They believe that students become better discussants when they watch the teacher model

appropriate behavior during a discussion, then receive opportunities to participate. Because discussions rely on student input, and require "quite a bit of practice in learning how to discuss,"[2] teachers become highly involved in teaching students directly about necessary discussion skills. Bill explained that "[Discussion] is nothing you walk into. It is something you literally teach the students to do over a period of time." When teaching students "how to" discuss, teachers provide direct instruction and coaching on the particulars of interacting with others.

Deborah said the development of students' "social skills and the recognition of their abilities...is an absolute requirement" for successful discussions, and these both occur as students practice discussing. Elaine also found that students needed practice speaking and interacting:

> when I want them to think [and talk] on their own, they get really nervous. [Some] say "we are too nervous, don't make us talk." We have a topic of the day or a question of the day. It may be anything from a topic in the news such as "How do you feel about gays in the military," to "What was the best thing about your three-day weekend?" It doesn't matter, it is whatever they choose. And I model it first...Then [a student] introduces a topic and has to give their example or their answer. Then we go around the room.

Teachers often pre-teach discussion skills to their students in an attempt to front load behaviors, attitudes, and interactions they consider are critical for classroom discussions. Elaine recalled that she sets time aside to prepare students for discussions, beginning the first day of school. She reported that students needed to be told about courtesy, respect, and manners when talking, and possibly disagreeing, with classmates. She accomplished this through explicit instruction:

> I spend a lot of time at the beginning of class teaching them about respect and about listening, and that it is important to have a voice and also to let others to have a voice, and the whole process of discernment.

Generally, teachers require students to adhere to surprisingly few rules during discussions. Other than a requirement to listen and respect their classmates' rights to share their opinions and ideas, teachers often do not teach a specific list of "do's and don'ts." Teachers emphasize the intent of rules, rather than the rules themselves. Alex recalled telling his students to respect others and not offend classmates:

> it's very essential that they respect each others' ideas...I tell them I don't care what you say as long as it's not personal, against anyone here at school, anybody in this

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[2]A comment made by Bill, during an interview.

> classroom, against your teacher, and it's within good taste, you can go ahead and say it. OK? and that's kind of the ground rules. Also, you must listen to other people.

But Alex also reported that he limited the topics and opinions students put forth, especially at the beginning of the year:

> I think you have a right to express your opinions, but there are acceptable and not acceptable opinions to express. If someone starts talking about how to remove the current form of government and replace it with an Aryan Nation type of a government, then that is not an acceptable opinion to put forth.

While diversity in a classroom may concern teachers because they perceive a greater potential for controversy, teachers believe that diversity has social benefits; It requires students to interact with classmates with whom they typically may not have contact during the school day. Teachers reported they anticipated problems. They taught students to listen to classmates' comments, and not pre-judge a comment based on an opinion or belief they held about a student. Inherent in this is the idea of a classroom community. "Community," as described by teachers, is comprised of attributes such as: trust and respect for one another, feelings of personal safety, an appropriate size of the group, and common goals for exploring issues and course-content together. Teachers tell students to view the class as a community. Doing so, teachers report, will make students more inclined to interact with one another. This is something that does not happen without effort by the teacher and willingness by the students. Teachers make efforts to earn students' trust, and students are held accountable to respect their classmates. Elaine said this was a training process: "I train them from the beginning to become a learning community...there is an atmosphere of trust." Frank explained further:

> I don't think I need that same trust for a lecture [as I do for a discussion]...Kids have got to trust me, and they have to trust each other. Because if they don't trust each other, then they will never share their real ideas.

Teachers also reported that they reminded their students to "step back" from the discussions and think about the interactions. Bill expressed this idea when he explained that students need to develop the ability to "step away from the discussion" and not be solely focused on presenting their personal view. By teaching students to consider the discussion as a whole, teachers hope to instill in their students the ability to choose the most appropriate behavior for promoting a discussion. Elaine,

for example, recalled that she reminded her students about the purpose of the discussion with prompts such as: "This isn't a debate right now, it is hearing everybody's point of view."

In addition to prompting students to consider their behavior, teachers emphasize the need for accurate, supportable comments during the discussions. Elaine provided an example of a classroom discussion on beginning a Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) program at her school. Her example suggests that teachers prod and question students in an attempt to direct them toward more fact-based opinions.

> Now we are debating this [JROTC] program. Once again, the kids don't all have all the information, but that doesn't stop them from having an opinion. So this [discussion] is a good way to get...kids to think critically [by] asking, "Where's the truth in your comments?" and "Do we need more information?"

Summary of Findings

Below is a brief description of the two purposes of discussion: discussion as a method of instruction, and discussion competence as the subject matter.

Discussion as a method of instruction. Teachers report that they use discussion as a method of instruction for two primary reasons. First, it encourages students to build their own knowledge of the subject matter. Second, discussion exposes students to multiple perspectives.

Teachers believe that the process of discussing develops students' thinking skills, and increases student motivation to make connections between what they talk about in school and what is happening in the world around them. The result is more in-depth learning about a topic, which helps students recognize connections between topics and concepts rather than merely comparing facts. Teachers believe that discussions will help students understand the subject matter more clearly, because the process of talking clarifies their thinking. Teachers plan discussions in an attempt to expose their students to multiple perspectives on a topic, and to determine how well students understand perspectives other than their own.

Discussion Competence as the Subject Matter

Teachers use classroom discussion to teach their students how to discuss. When teaching discussion as a curriculum outcome, teachers have purposes for *teaching* discussion, and they explicitly teach students how to be discussants.

Teachers want their students to develop discussion skills for many of the same reasons that they teach with discussion. If students will engage in discussions outside of the classroom, then the possibility of students building knowledge, exploring multiple perspectives, or thinking in-depth about issues also extends outside of the classroom. An additional purpose for teaching students how to engage in discussion related to citizenship education, and preparing students to discuss issues and policies.

Teachers think of discussion as a skill that requires practice sessions. At times they plan discussions so students may practice engaging in verbal interactions with one another. They believe that students become better discussants when they watch the teacher model appropriate behavior during a discussion, then receive opportunities to practice engaging in discussions. Teachers also reported that they reminded their students to "step back" from the discussions and think about the interactions. In addition to prompting students to consider their behavior, teachers emphasize the need for accurate, supportable comments during the discussions.

Implications

What this study has provided, in short, is insight into teacher thinking about classroom discussion. Teachers do not plan and use classroom discussion only as an alternative method to group work, lecture, recitation, or other methods of instruction. They also "teach discussion" to their students, emphasizing the skills and dispositions needed for this unique form of classroom talk. Here, I focus on three implications of this study: The complexity of teachers' conceptions, the role of teachers as discussion leaders who use discussion and teach discussion, and suggestions for educating teachers about classroom discussion.

Complexity of Conceptions

Teachers have multiple conceptions of discussion, but are not fully credited with the amount of thought they give to classroom interactions. This may explain why prior research has claimed that teachers will label any teacher-student interaction as "discussion" (Cazden, 1988; Dillon, 1984, 1990; Gall & Gall, 1990; Wilen, 1990). On the surface, teachers will call most classroom interactions

discussion, but in their mind they differentiate between different types of discussion, with each having specific characteristics and purposes. Teachers think differently about discussion based on what they hope to accomplish during a lesson.

Recitation is the most frequent form of interaction between teachers and students, and teachers believe it to be a type of discussion. This is not their only conception. They also use discussion to accomplish higher-level cognitive goals such as understanding multiple perspectives, building knowledge, and developing thinking skills. They see value in the process of discussing as well as in the product or outcome of the discussion. Teachers allow for discussions that provide students with opportunities to better understand the topic or issue being discussed. They also plan discussions that have more of an assessment purpose, and use them to evaluate student understanding and participation. While I drew a distinction between discussion as method and discussion as outcome, teachers will often combine these two purposes; They use discussion to teach subject matter, but they also will teach students the skills needed to discuss during these same discussions.

Leading Discussion

Teachers' leadership roles during classroom discussion is critical to its success. Teachers report that they lead differently depending on the purpose for the discussion. Teachers need to be involved in the classroom interactions. Even when teachers assume more the role of participant with students, their involvement in the interactions are different from the students because they model appropriate behavior, assess the accuracy of information being presented by students, and act as a monitor to insure the discussion serves the purposes for which it was planned.

Teachers comment that students talk differently, and that the gender, ethnicities, and races of the students often are the cause of these differences. During discussions, teachers must allow all students the opportunity to participate. A concern with helping students overcome feelings of intimidation, lack of confidence, disenfranchisement with the classroom community, or inexperience with verbal interactions should be paramount as teachers monitor the classroom discussion. The goal is to provide an atmosphere that is conducive to participation from all students. At times teachers may

limit the talk of the "talkers" in a class so those who are not participating are put in a position to verbalize their thinking.

Teacher Education

Teacher educators and school administrators should consider teaching the discussion method because of its potential to enhance student learning and democratic citizenship. Through classroom discussions, students might develop abilities to interact with others about issues of common interest. This is critical for a democratic system of government that values input from its citizens. Students, thought of as citizens-in-process, might learn how to engage in discussions with classmates of different races, genders, social status, and abilities, and allow equal participation by every student.

Additionally, constructivist thought suggests that students learn subject matter better when they are required to organize it themselves and develop an individualized understanding of the concepts being taught. Discussion is a valuable tool for teachers to have in their collection of instructional methods, especially in light of long standing calls for educators to teach problem-solving skills and to promote conceptual understanding of material.

Using classroom discussion, as either a method or as an outcome, is a difficult task for teachers. Teachers' roles during discussion is critical to the purpose of the discussion, even when discussion appears to be student driven (e.g., when it encourages student-to-student interactions). Before the discussion begins, teachers should determine the purpose of the discussion, their role during the discussion, and how to facilitate the types of interactions they want to have. When discussion is used as a method, teachers will be focused on the content and comments of the students. When the discussion becomes an outcome, teachers turn their attention more to the interactions of the students, and less on the content of the discussion. Instructing pre-service and in-service teachers explicitly about discussion, and the purposes served by using and teaching discussion, could encourage its effective use in the classroom.

Conclusion

On the theoretical level, this study provides empirical support for models about teachers thinking about discussion. This fills a gap in conceptual models of teachers' conceptions of discussion

by offering knowledge grounded in data. If discussion is to be used in the classroom, then we must know what teachers think about it, how they plan to use it, and what purposes it serves in the classroom. On the practical level, by exploring two purposes of discussion, this research encourages teacher education, and the classroom teacher, to be on the "same page" conceptually when referring to discussion. The literature review of Wilen and White (1991) reveals that characteristics of discussion in the classroom are not widely known. It is important to develop some idea of what teachers envision as their uses for discussion before descriptions of discussion in the classroom proceed much further.

I have attempted to explore the distinction between discussion as method and discussion as outcome. The objective of using discussion, the kinds of explicit instruction that are provided to student discussants, the rationales for teaching or using discussion, the relationship of classroom rules to discussion rules, and teachers' skills as discussion leaders all hinge on this difference. Considering how teachers use discussion is insufficient when exploring teachers' purposes for classroom discussion. Instead the focus should explore how teachers use and teach discussion.

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